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ABSTRACT

The National Association for the Education of Young Children endorses an anti-bias curriculum for early childhood programs, in which early childhood educators are encouraged to enhance children's development of tolerance for cultural, gender, and ability diversity. This paper is an ethnography of the culture and processes of a group of three administrators and seven early childhood teachers from four child care centers who participated in a support-supervision group while implementing an anti-bias curriculum in their programs. Effects on members of group participation were analyzed based on questionnaires, journals of all participants and the facilitator, audiotaped group sessions, participant observation of the facilitator and an outside observer, and open-ended, in-depth interviews conducted by a third person. Data were categorized into three major themes: definitions of bias, group outcomes, and the facilitator's role. Subcategories were identified, including connections participants made between personal lives and professional behavior, awareness, and trust and discomfort. Primary attention in this paper is devoted to one of these subcategories--connections that participants made between personal lives and professional behavior. (Contains 36 references.) (Author/HTH)

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Prod and Pry from Inside Out: Ethnography of an Anti-Bias Support-Supervision Group for Teachers of Young Children

Tamar Jacobson

Abstract

The National Association for the Education of Young Children endorses an anti-bias curriculum for early childhood programs, in which early childhood educators are encouraged to enhance children's development of tolerance for cultural, gender, and ability diversity. Three administrators and seven early childhood teachers from four child care centers participated in a support-supervision group while implementing an anti-bias curriculum in their programs. This paper is an ethnography of the culture and processes of the group. Effects on members of group participation were analyzed based on questionnaires, journals of all participants and the facilitator, audiotaped group sessions, participant observation of the facilitator and an outside observer, and open-ended, in-depth interviews conducted by a third person. Data were categorized into three major themes: definitions of bias, group outcomes, and the facilitator's role. Subcategories were identified, including connections participants made between personal lives and professional behavior, awareness, and trust and discomfort. Primary attention in this paper is devoted to one of these subcategories—connections that participants made between personal lives and professional behavior.

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Children form biased and prejudiced views as early as 2 years old, according to the Anti-Bias Curriculum Task Force (Derman-Sparks, 1990). Most white children, by the age of 4, have developed strong in-group preferences and negative attitudes toward other racial groups (Banks, 1993). By implementing well-developed curriculum interventions, educators can help young children develop more positive racial behaviors and attitudes. According to Banks, teachers are the "key variable" in implementing diversity education. "Teachers are human beings who bring their cultural perspectives, values, hopes, and dreams to the classroom. The teacher's values and behaviors strongly influence the views, conceptions, and behaviors of young children" (p. 248).

Teachers (of all colors) make assumptions about minority children's actions, words, intellects, families, and communities that are often inadequate (Delpit, 1995). These assumptions are a result of living within a society that maintains and nurtures stereotypes. Teachers have a responsibility to develop self-awareness in order to model nonbiased behaviors for children (Bowman, 1989).

Early childhood teachers read books about multicultural education (Byrnes & Kiger, 1992; Gonzalez-Mena, 1993; Kendall, 1983; McCracken, 1993; Neugebauer, 1992; Ramsey, 1987; Vold, 1992; York, 1991; Gordon & Browne, 1996), display recommended materials, or play multicultural music in their classrooms. However, not much is being done to support them in becoming aware of their own attitudes towards bias. Most books about implementation of multicultural education explain that teachers should analyze their attitudes, beliefs, and values, and focus on behaviors such as acceptance, openness in understanding the value of diversity, or advocating for tolerance. None of them, however, suggests how teachers might develop these skills.

Unless we facilitate a time for teachers to reflect on themselves and assist them in developing awareness of past experiences, it is highly unlikely that teachers will be nonbiased as they interact with children and families (Bowman & Stott, 1994). There is evidence that reflective practice enhances change in classroom practice. The National Institute for Early Childhood Professional Development expects professionals to

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engage in reflective practice (National Association for the Education of Young Children, 1994). Teachers are encouraged to cultivate certain specific attitudes towards reflective thinking such as open-mindedness, whole heartedness, and responsibility for facing the consequences (Dewey, 1933). Much of the research about reflective practice looks at teachers' ability to assess a situation and make sense out of the experience.

"Teachers who reflect on how they feel and why they feel the way they do are in a better position to understand their interactions with others" (Bowman, 1989, p. 445). The idea of self-awareness is discussed as assisting teachers in their classroom practices and personal lives and is characterized as "valuable, perhaps indispensable" (Ayers, 1989, p. ix). Ayers suggests that if teachers become more self-conscious, they could then become "more intentional, more able to endorse or reject aspects of their own teaching that they found hopeful or contrary, more able to author their own teaching scripts" (p. 140). Ayers shares his autobiography and self-reflection, which he believes is crucial for teaching (Ayers, 1993). He suggests that teachers should be asking: "Who are you? How did you come to take on your views and outlooks? What forces helped to shape you? ... self-knowledge is most important (and least attended to)" (p. 129).

Teachers have control over the decisions they make, and without their active involvement, autonomy, and reflection, it seems difficult to make changes in classroom practice. In a case study where a teacher's beliefs about how children learn to read are strongly tied to his view of himself as a reader and how he learned to read, Richardson (1990) wonders if we are able to effect change in teacher education "other than through a type of individualistic, psychoanalytic approach" (p. 13). Having outlined some problems of teacher education, Brown discusses the use of a new metaphor—"therapy"—that would not only "enable us to understand what we do in fact believe, but to help us find out what is behind those beliefs. What are the images, fears, joys, associations we hold onto that generate such beliefs?" (Brown, 1982, p. 12).

Some teachers form support groups for reflective practice, as in the whole language movement (Paley, 1986; Rich, 1991; Salzer, 1991; Trueba, 1989). While a few of these groups are affiliated with school systems, mostly they are supported by the teachers themselves. However, there does not seem to be evidence of a support system for teachers to discuss emotional discomfort that is generated by prejudice. In the early childhood profession, in particular, there is little evidence of institutional emphasis on teacher reflection of any kind (Bowman, 1989). Wood, Cobb, and Yackel (1991) noted that teachers who are going to make drastic changes in their way of teaching would need support. Although, traditionally, support groups were formed because of medical or social problems, others exist for those going through a major transition in their lives, a definition that would include teachers desiring to make substantial changes in their professional practice (Salzer, 1991).

Teacher support groups have been effective in creating educational change. Not only have teachers been able to share successes and failures with their peers, they have also found "wisdom, a sense of justice, and a deep understanding of children, particularly of those who are neglected by prejudicial educational policies and practices" (Trueba, 1989, p. 150). No matter how much emphasis is placed on such other qualities in teaching as educational technique, technology, equipment, or buildings, the humanity of the teacher is the vital ingredient if children are to learn (Greenberg, 1969).

In 1955, Jersild conducted a five-year study where he surveyed about a thousand people, some of whom had experienced psychotherapy and had been seeking to discover what the idea of self-understanding might mean in their work as teachers (Jersild, 1955). Many expressed a desire for help such as might be gotten from group therapy. In an earlier article, Jersild suggests that in a group setting a person is able to learn to face herself by the interactions and responses of the other participants towards herself (Jersild, 1954). Jersild strongly urges the education community to add this type of support group to teacher preparation and to ongoing staff development.

One feminist researcher advocates developing groups for social change. "Revolutionary groups" should be "free, diverse, no bigger than the extended family—and everywhere" (Steinem, 1992, p. 348). Derman-

Sparks and members of the Anti-Bias Curriculum Task Force suggest forming "Anti-Bias Support/ Training Groups" (Derman-Sparks, Hohensee, Jimenez, Walker, & Watanabe, 1992).

Methodology

The author studied a support-supervision group for teachers of young children from various child care centers in Buffalo, New York. The term "support-supervision" was used to emphasize a counseling model of supervision for teachers. Ten early childhood educators from four child care centers voluntarily participated in a support group for a period of 20 weeks at bi-weekly sessions each lasting 2 hours. They had answered a letter, which was sent to 35 child care centers, inviting teachers to join a group for support implementing an anti-bias curriculum.

An important component of the study was an investigation of the connections that teachers made between personal feelings and their own behaviors in the classroom. The emergent nature of research required a "naturalist paradigm" (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) and used in-depth interviews and participant observations in order to obtain descriptive and qualitative data. The first broad question for the study was: what are the experiences of early educators in an anti-bias support-supervision group? As the group began to take shape, the role of the facilitator became a second issue. During data analysis, themes emerged, one of which was the connections between personal prejudice and professional behavior. Creating and facilitating the support group required a high level of participant observation.

Collection of Data

Participation was outlined to the group members as including attendance, journal writing, reading *Anti-Bias Curriculum: Tools for Empowering Young Children* (Derman-Sparks, 1990), taping group sessions, observation by a person other than the facilitator, in-depth interviews, and questionnaires at the beginning and end of the 20-week period. Each person was given Derman-Sparks's book as a gift for participation.

A second person, uninvolved with the support group sessions, conducted 1-1/2-hour in-depth interviews with each participant, at the conclusion of the 20-week period of support group sessions. I taped and transcribed interviews. Questions were based on two previous pilot studies of similar support groups (which I conducted two years prior to this study), analysis of participants' journals, and field notes. At times, personal experiences required further probing or additional questions relating to each individual specifically.

Subjectivity

Subjectivity, in a qualitative study, is brought into the process of inquiry. An ethnographer is encouraged to confront her biases and bring them into personal consciousness (Ayers, 1989; Peshkin, 1988). Peshkin suggests that researchers should "seek out their subjectivity" not only during analysis of data but "while their research is actively in progress" (p. 17). Researchers should become aware of how their inquiry and outcomes are shaped by their subjectivity and "disclose to their readers where self and subject became joined" (p. 17).

While positivists might regard bias as a problem, it can be seen as a strength of ethnographic inquiry with "empathic regard" as key to good data collection (Ayers, 1989). A sense of compassion and involvement is necessary, in fact essential, to a study where the subjects are also the source about how people feel and face their teaching lives (p. 20). Roman and Apple (1990) also challenge attempts to avoid subjectivity and talk about educational research as being an ethical and political act.

Data Analysis

Interpretation of data began as soon as the support group sessions started. I attended sessions with a professional counselor who supervised my interpretations of the support group every two weeks. Transcripts of interviews, participant journals, and written exercises were read several times, and codes were established by highlighting expressions, terms, ideas, or descriptions that occurred repeatedly in similar contexts. Establishing codes helped to determine and

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categorize themes that emerged from the stated experience of the participants. The most dominant themes that emerged from reading and coding transcripts of interviews and journals were matched with classes of data from the process of the support group sessions.

Validity

From the beginning, participants were invited to speak out whenever they felt discomfort and were able to leave of their own free will at any time. One of the central issues of this study was, in fact, the cooperation of the participants. Through my familiarity with the group in the role of its facilitator, I was able to gain a rapport that might not have been possible had I been a stranger, and a trust was developed with participants, which is important to a study of this nature.

One form of triangulation was by participant observation of a second observer, who wrote comprehensive field notes of two of the group sessions. As a second form of triangulation, a third person conducted interviews at the end of the 20-week period. A third form of triangulation was "participant checking": Two years after the support group had ended, the participants were given a draft of the dissertation and invited to a reunion meeting to discuss what they had read.

Prod and Pry from Inside Out

Group members were asked to choose pseudonyms in order to ensure confidentiality, as they had agreed to be quoted in the written section of the research project. All names of the participants are pseudonyms.

I became intimately involved with the way the participants were feeling about their personal and professional lives, and often shared my personal background. For a period of four months, I was able, many times, to challenge them and myself. It seemed as if perceptions about themselves and society were broadened, and awareness about bias and our work became, as Chloe described it, "big." As my own biases surely have affected interpretation of data and facilitation of the support group, I feel it is necessary to share with the reader my beliefs about bias as a survival skill. These beliefs were not shared with the group in a conscious way. However, they guided me through making choices about what questions to ask or at which times to probe further with a participant who was experiencing difficulty.

Adults develop theories about life from birth, based on a number of variables: personal life experience, interactions with society, and formal acquisition of knowledge. As professionals, adults learn to balance personal feelings with skills-oriented knowledge acquired. However, in order for situations or interactions to be acceptable, they have to make sense. Sense making is often dependent on survival skills or the way a person has learned to perceive her environment. Young children develop skills to survive emotional experiences that cause discomfort and pain or fear of the unknown.

For example, Hattie (one of the group members) chose to live without a man to raise her daughter. This decision could be interpreted as a survival skill developed from her personal and emotional experience. She learned, at a very young age, that "men always leave" and she will always be abandoned. She chose not to stay with a man so that she would not have to experience the abandonment that she felt sure would occur.

While these skills might have worked for a child, helpless and dependent, they become unnecessary and, at times, an obstacle for functional living in later years. Adults try to acquire different skills when they want to make changes in attitudes and behaviors. This process is often uncomfortable and, sometimes, painful because it becomes frightening to give up survival skills. After all, they helped a person survive:

> After abuse and trauma, it is really difficult to "let down one's guard." It is the hardest piece about survival to let go of. It is at the heart, the core, and the source of bias or prejudice and peace: within and without. (my journal, after one of the group sessions)

There is place for knowledge in rethinking or challenging learned survival skills. In addition, there is place for self-reflection about one's own life experi-

ences and emotions. A balance between the cognitive and emotional, I believe, enhances awareness of bias and development of tolerance. In *The Color of Fear*, a movie about pro-diversity shown to high schools, one actor explained this idea to another: "Your survival affects how you hear me."

Self-reflection began for me as a preschool teacher in the early seventies. I read *Between Parent and Child* by Ginott (1961). The revelation for me, as I read that book, was the realization that adult interactions with me, when I was a child, affected me deeply. From then on, as I worked with children, I made connections between my life experience, survival skills, and professional behavior. In a sense, I "support-supervised" myself. Professionally, it was lonely. I thought about forming a group of teachers for support in processing many of the emotions, fears, and discomfort areas that arise while working with young children and their families. Therefore, this study became important for me, in a personal way.

As the idea grew, I had no doubt that I would facilitate such a group. One of the participants, Gloria, had called it a group working from "the inside out." It was important for me to experience the effects of such a group, as the facilitator, and not as a participant. Thus, I became researcher. I wanted to check it out, or as Lilian Katz would say, "prod and pry" (Katz, 1996). According to my life experience, confronting bias and attitudes of prejudice is an ongoing process—uncomfortable, painful, and unresolved.

Many times I challenged the participants to make connections between personal bias and interactions with children in their classrooms or staff at their centers. At times, I felt I succeeded. It was difficult at first, when I did not. I learned, time and time again, that my survival affected how I was able to hear the participants.

Connections between Personal and Professional

> "I AM HERE FOR CHILDREN AS WELL AS MYSELF!!" (Chloe, journal)

> Bias would be a whole bunch of stuff ... It could be sexual orientation. It could be ... like a person with a physical handicap who's in a wheelchair. You know, it's just the way you speak about someone I guess ... or even body language towards someone ... facial expressions, tone of voice, you know, talking down to someone ... I don't even know if I could define [it] because it's so wide. It's everything around us—from gender and race to families and relationships, how we look at other people. (Chloe, interview)

The purpose of the support-supervision group was not to be an inservice training model for teachers, which would give them technical assistance for developing a new curriculum. Indeed, the name "supervision" was specifically used as a model from counseling supervision. Participants were encouraged to examine how they had acquired bias in terms of their personal feelings and beliefs:

> I just finished calling the group to confirm plans for our Seder. I don't know if I can effectively comment on how excited I am about all of this, but of course I'll give it a stab. Everyone sounds genuinely interested in participating. Some, like Molly, are really looking forward to coming. Even as an adult, I am finding myself to be so pleased that others are interested and curious about my Judaism. Can you imagine how children must feel? This has great implications for our work. Children, like adults, need to feel that we are genuinely interested in the specific aspects of their lives that they feel is important. (Simcha, journal)

> Simcha surprised me the most. I feel she had a tremendous amount of courage to tell everyone, many of them strangers, that she is gay. I didn't know that about her ... [she] reminds me of my sister ... who is also gay. My sister and I are identical twins—isn't it interesting that we have the same genetic makeup and were raised in the same environment, yet she is gay and I am not? (Danielle, journal)

I worked at guiding the participants to focus on understanding how their personal feelings and beliefs, which had developed throughout their life, might be connected to working with children or other adults:

> I told the people who missed the last meeting that I was a lesbian. That discussion led into one about Gloria's students. It was a quite thorough discussion around issues of gender and sexuality

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> (in a broad sense). This discussion seemed to be exactly what this group is about. We talked about our personal feelings about it but also talked about the practical (which is what I like to do!)—solutions about talking to parents, helping individual children as well as groups of children deal with differences—helping the individual accept and be themself and teach others to treat each other with respect. (Katherine, journal)

Making these connections required exploring relationships with their family of origin and entering painful, emotional territory at times, as they remembered difficult situations in their childhood and personal lives. For example, when the group was asked to consider how they felt about separation, as it became time to anticipate the end of the group meetings, Hattie wrote about feelings of separation in her journal:

> ... But back to me, how was all this talk of separation? How do I handle separation? Think, feel, how does it feel? All the way back through so many endings of men in my life. Ah, scream, wail, pound the walls, the ground, "no, no this cannot be happening, come back, come back, don't leave!" Countless times pleading, crawling on the ground, on my knees, "DON'T LEAVE ME!!!" Arms reaching, running, chasing, NO!"
>
> I see my mother crying after my father, the very words that I uttered after those men. In my memories of my painful beginnings, I feel my pain. As I look back on it as an adult, and as a parent, it has changed form again. As a child, I was so frightened. Would he really go this time, never to return?
>
> I wonder, do we ever stop reacting the same way? Do I always go after the one who, thank goodness, has finally left? I'm afraid to even attempt another matching up. Am I always to be attracted to men who continue to hurt with their love, who are passively aggressive, who play with me and I with them? Am I forever angry and half empty. I want to know if I really can change that. Is it instead like some genetic coding that cannot be erased? Are children able to change their world view? Can teachers and caregivers find the keys to turn their behaviors that are self-defeating into healthier ones? (Hattie, journal)

There was much evidence that participants were making connections between personal issues and their work. At times, connections were made in terms of understanding situations in their childhood that affected how they viewed interactions with children in their care. At other times, connections were made with what transpired in the group as affecting changes in participants' behavior with children or adults. These types of connections were more subtle and dealt with modeling behaviors of other group members or myself:

> It's a place to talk about the private stuff of your life or of your work. And it always does seem to tie back into your private life. If you started at private life, it ties back into work. If you start at work, it ties back into private life. They're just interconnected ... it just evolves, and that's what excites. (Hattie, interview).
>
> ... we discuss things. People's biases and how our own bias can be portrayed onto the children ... we talked about personal things amongst the group members ... Just talking about how our biases affect ourselves and how it affects the children we deal with every day. And then how, if they come from different backgrounds ... how that would affect us in dealing with them. (Chloe, interview)
>
> Work-wise I think it gave me or helped me be a little stronger in speaking up to certain issues that I would see ... so I think it's helped me push myself to talk to people ... and be a little more, I don't want to say assertive, but maybe stronger in dealing with things that bother me with other people ... I think I made a big jump. (Katherine, interview)

Four of the participants described the process of "self-examination" as uncomfortable and painful. Trust and discomfort became connected, because, on the one hand, as four of the women expressed difficulty working through situations and reflecting on their discomfort, others, on the other, described it as necessary to feel trusting and safe in order to self-reflect or make changes. The experience of discomfort was linked to self-awareness or desiring to make changes:

> This group is uncomfortable for me because it makes me think about things I'd rather not think about. (Danielle, journal)

Katherine described that trust was important for respect and honesty even as participants shared

angry moments. She made connections between trust and tolerance:

> Actually, I think one of the most helpful things was it helped me build trust in other people. Because we talked about some very personal and painful things. And we were able to be honest with each other and sometimes disagree and there was even anger expressed. But at the end, everyone still respected and treated each other with respect ... I think it is helpful in anti-bias. It is not directly related but I think getting through any bias the trust issue is what's important. (Katherine, interview)

Discussion

Participants made connections between perceptions of bias and their interactions with children or staff:

> ... that was such a perfect example of the meat of all of this ... the connection ... that personal [connection] with the bias issues ... with the children. That was so perfect. (Katherine, reunion session)

Generally, teachers are not given assistance in identifying the source of their prejudice. Some of their behaviors are unconscious and affected by bias. All participants made some connections between how their own prejudices affected their behaviors with children, families, colleagues, or board members. Evidence of this conclusion was supported by data from all participants. For half of the participants, it was surprising for them to discover, in fact, how biased they were:

> ... the most overwhelming thing was how very biased we are about everything ... just the awareness level is so heightened because of the meetings. (Lydia, interview)

Two of the participants expressed that some of their behaviors, interactions, and perceptions of the angry children in their classrooms had been as a result of unconscious emotional issues within themselves. Heightened consciousness is an important step in the process of self-reflection towards making changes for oneself or the educational system. However, it requires taking risks and, for many, that feels uncomfortable or unsafe when experienced alone. One teacher educator suggests being a "resistance fighter on behalf of children" (Ayers, 1993, p. 131). That is a tough order for teachers unless they are given support and a safe environment in which to explore the risks of "self-criticism" that he recommends.

Simcha described the group as being different from regular staff meetings. She attributed that difference to the emotional nature of the group:

> ... not that it was unprofessional, but we crossed a line that would not necessarily happen in a staff meeting. The emotions ... people were very free to speak, very free to support or criticize, which happened over time as well as we became more comfortable with each other. Um, it was much more emotionally based ... You typically would not have, or hopefully would not have, staff members crying in a staff meeting. And it was not unusual for someone to become emotional to the point of tears in our group. (Simcha, interview)

Simcha raised an important consideration when she used the expression, "crossed a line." Does the concept of self-reflection relate only to cognitive and social awareness? Should teacher education and therapy be linked in some ways? Katherine asked two years after the support group, "Is it [self-reflection about bias] even a responsibility?"

There is no expectation of teachers of young children to explore or understand their own emotions. It is definitely not required and sometimes not even mentioned or discussed. And yet teachers are forced to deal with uncomfortable, emotional issues all day, sometimes moment by moment. Although therapy-type issues arose, the group attempted no therapy *per se*. It did, however, raise important concerns for creating a safe environment for participants in future groups of this nature.

Limitations

Although an invitation letter was sent to over 30 child care centers throughout western New York, participants were all Caucasian women. The group was able to deal with issues of age, gender, religion, and sexual orientation. However, culture was dealt with theoretically. Male gender issues were mentioned in passing and dealt with theoretically.

Length of time seemed to be a limitation for the group members. Similar groups might continue for a longer period of time, depending on the needs of participants. Had the group been together a few months longer, different issues might have been presented or evidence been stronger on certain themes.

A person other than myself interviewed participants so that they would feel free to describe what they had felt about the group experience without pressure to please me. Possibly some of their replies were consciously or unconsciously aimed at helping me out. More than half the participants described themselves as people who like to help, have difficulty in refusing, and who like to please others.

Conclusion

It is difficult to enter the domain of tolerance for diversity without challenging fundamental perceptions and attitudes of participants. I observed and challenged subjects to expand their perceptions of bias, and I was, myself, challenged at the same time.

Teachers treat children as they are treated (Katz, 1993). In that case, if we want teachers to treat children fairly, listen to, accept, and understand them, thereby enhancing children's self-identity, supervisors and educators must do the same for teachers. Some form of support for in-depth self-reflection about bias and emotional awareness is necessary for a fundamental change of tolerance for diversity.

There can be no doubt that an anti-bias curriculum is essential in developing tolerance for diversity and fair treatment for all. Resolving issues of bias is an ongoing process, and teachers would benefit from support in this type of self-reflection. We pay a high price when we neglect this area of staff development. If we are concerned about making a fundamental change in pro-diversity education of all young children, how do we support teachers with a fundamental change in themselves? "What should we be doing? The answers, I believe, lie not in a proliferation of new reform programs but in some basic understandings of who we are and how we are connected and disconnected from one another" (Delpit, 1995, p. xv).

> I'm noticing more and more with the children how much the media affects gender decisions ... girl toys vs boy toys ... I feel I have not conquered my biases but have opened up my eyes to all that exists in the world. I can confront and deal with them better than before but have not really worked anything out. (Chloe, journal)

This study did not solve the problems of bias nor give all the answers to the concept of self-reflection. However, it did broaden perspectives and support teachers of young children in making some changes in personal and professional lives by challenging them to face bias and their inner selves.

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